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Jack Anderson

The Day Carter Considered Scrapping the MX

For a decade now, U.S. military policy-makers have grappled with the growing vulnerability to Soviet attack of our land-based intercontinental ballistic missiles. Ronald Reagan campaigned in 1980 on the need to close this "window of vulnerability."

But for one brief moment, President Carter considered a radical solution to the window of vulnerability: scrapping the land-based missile systems altogether.

A personal, eight-page memorandum to Carter from his defense secretary, Harold Brown, dissuaded the president from abandoning the triad. The memo was classified top secret and locked away in White House and Pentagon vaults. But a copy has now been slipped to my associate Dale Van Atta.

Brown was a pivotal consultant to the Scowcroft Commission, and some of the points in the 1978 memo are clearly reflected in the commission's pro-MX report last month. Brown's memo to Carter began:

"At our meeting on September 29, you asked why—since [the] Minuteman [missile] is becoming vulnerable, and since [one MX basing system] involves thorny questions of its own—we should not simply abandon the ICBM leg of the triad and strengthen the remaining two legs as necessary. . . ."

Brown acknowledged that "in simplest terms, we could indeed abandon the ICBM leg and move to a dyad of SLBMs [submarine-launched ballistic missiles] and bombers." But, he added, "we would give up features of both perceptual and military value that we have enjoyed in the past."

Once warmed up, Brown struck hard: "The effect of the U.S. giving up, under successful Soviet pressure, a military capability of considerable value which the Soviet Union retains would, in my view, have disastrous consequences both internationally and domestically."

The defense secretary then laid out seven reasons why he and most Pentagon strategists had concluded that the United States must spend billions on silo-based missiles:

- Independence from tactical warning: ICBMs don't need to make a hair-trigger response to "possibly ambiguous warning," and thus an accidental nuclear war could be prevented.
- Endurance: ICBMs can "maintain some capability after an initial exchange—perhaps for days, or weeks, or even a few months." Bomber bases have no such survivability, Brown pointed out, while sumbarines, though eminently durable by being hard to find, would be difficult to communicate with for the same reason.
- Quick-response hard-target capability: Land-based ICBMs have superior accuracy and destructive power to eliminate Soviet missiles in reinforced silos. Their response time (30 minutes to Moscow) is also superior.
- Good command, control and communications: "ICBMs have great advantages" in reliable communications links to the president. Communications to bombers are highly vulnerable and those to submarines even worse.
- Diversity: in comments that read almost like a draft of the Scowcroft Commission's page-long defense of the triad concept, Brown explained that land-based missiles are "a hedge against marked Soviet progress in anti-submarine warfare," as well as "against Soviet development of a successful tactic against our bomber bases . . . or a much stronger Soviet air defense." Brown concluded that "failure of a single leg of even a dyad of SLBMs and bombers need not be catastrophic, but failure of both—unlike the triad—would be."
- Costs: because reliance on a submarine-bomber dyad would mean beefing up these two forces, the overall cost of maintaining a triad of strategic options would not be significantly more, Brown argued.
- Better fighting capability: finally, land-based missiles offer the greatest punch and versatility to fight a nuclear war once it has begun. "We can retarget them quickly and launch as few as one if necessary," Brown wrote.

Brown concluded his memorandum with a fairly grim statement about fighting such a limited nuclear war. Remember, this is from a defense secretary in a Democratic administration:

"I should note that I doubt that a strategic war of this [limited] kind is at all likely, or that it could be fought without rapid escalation to an unlimited spasm. But there are many indications that the Soviets are structuring their forces to fight such a war. Their plans and exercises point the same way. If they think they have such a capability, and we both know the United States does not, adverse military consequences are possible, and adverse political consequences very likely."

Footnote: of course the MX missile, like every stationary, land-based weapon, would be vulnerable to a first strike.